

## Interview with ANTHONIA OLUFEYIKEMI OGUNMEFUN

### Transcript

For the Diversifying the Bar: Lawyers Make History Project  
Law Society of Upper Canada

Interviewee:       Anthonia Olufeyikemi Ogunmefun

Interviewer:       Allison Kirk-Montgomery

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Transcribed by Flying Fingers Inc. and edited by Allison Kirk-Montgomery.

[To improve clarity and flow, the transcript has been edited by Allison Kirk-Montgomery to remove instances of false starts in sentences, noises of encouragement by the interviewer, the sounds “um,” “uh,” made by both parties, and most occurrences of the phrase, “you know” on the part of the interviewee]

### **Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Well, good afternoon.

### **Kemi:**

Good afternoon, Allison.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Kemi, I'm here with you as you, as you know, on behalf of The Law Society of Upper Canada, and I am involved in a project called "Diversifying the bar: Lawyers make History", excuse me, and I'm delighted that you will be participating, you are participating in the project, by agreeing to be interviewed by me, on this. So, would you please tell me, your full name.

**Kemi:**

My name, my full name is Anthonia Olufeyikemi Ogunmefun.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, do you use all of those?

**Kemi:**

Yes. Anthonia is my first legal name and it is on all of my documents, but I tend to use my middle name, Olufeyikemi, I go by Kemi, which is the last four letters of my middle name, because that's what people call me. But on all the legal documents I have Anthonia, there, then the middle name, but I'm known as Kemi.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Okay. And Ogunmefun? Is that how you pronounce it?

**Kemi:**

Ogunmefun, is my, is my married name.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What was your maiden name?

**Kemi:**

Lucas. L-u-c-a-s. Simple [Allison laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, where and when were you born?

**Kemi:**

I was born in Lagos, Nigeria, on, September 22, 1951. Lagos, at that time, was still part of the British colonies, so, I was technically born a British citizen. After Independence, Lagos was the capital of Nigeria, and it remained as the capital until about just over 30 years ago, when the Nigerian government decided to move the capital to what would be the centre of Nigeria, because, people from other parts of Nigeria complained about coming all the way down to Lagos from the North. So, the new capital of Nigeria, called Abuja, is supposed to be the centre of Nigeria, so everybody has to travel equal distance, to the capital, but, Lagos remains the, commercial capital of Nigeria, and it's also the capital of the, the state, legal state, because, in, in Nigeria, we have states rather than provinces, and Lagos state is where I reside and the capital is Lagos.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, do you, so you're a city girl?

**Kemi:**

I am a city girl. I, I am what you call an urban African. So when people ask me, "Have you ever seen a lion or giraffe?" And I say, "No" [both laugh]. I had to go to England to see that. So, I'm, I'm what you'd call an urban African.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Okay. And, I understand that there's a lot of ethnic groups in Nigeria, a lot of states as well. So, how do you identify your Nigerian roots?

**Kemi:**

Um, what we've, come up with is that, having been a former British colony, we have four official languages. English is the uniting language, all of us speak English and we communicate with other tribes in English, but, they have three major tribes, you have Yoruba, and that's basically western Nigeria, that's where I come from. Then you have Ebo, which is the eastern part of the country, and then you have Hausa, which is the northern part of the country. So you'd have a situation on national television, where news will be said in English, and after that, it would be repeated, in Yoruba, for the west, Ebo for the east, and Hausa, for the north. So that's how we communicate.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And so, do you speak Yoruba?

**Kemi:**

I speak Yoruba. I don't speak any other Nigerian language.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, do you write, Yoruba? Is it a?

**Kemi:**

Yes, and it's written, it's a very well, developed language, the Bible has been translated into Yoruba, and there are lots of Yoruban novels that have been written, and lots of Yoruban plays. So it's, it's well established, and what the Nigerian government has tried to do, is that, in the in the schools, in the, in the secondary schools, the children have to take another language apart from the one they speak as a part of the curriculum, but I think most children just learn a few basics and they don't practise it unless they go and live in another part of Nigeria.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Where they have to use it.

**Kemi:**

Where they have to use it.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, when you were growing up, what was your language within your home?

**Kemi:**

Um, within my home, we had English and Yoruba. People around me spoke to me in Yoruba, but my parents spoke to me in English because they wanted me to be able to speak English. Just before my 10<sup>th</sup> birthday, I was sent to school in England, and so I was in England for seven years. I did part of my primary school there, and also secondary school, I was sent to a private school (which in England, you call that a public school), but it was a private school run by nuns, because my mother was a Catholic, and I was there for seven years. Then I came back to Nigeria and I did the equivalent of the OAC, because I wanted to go to university, and then I went in 1971 to the University of Lagos to study, for my LLB.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Wow, there's a lot of experience in that paragraph that you just said, isn't there?

**Kemi:**

Yes, yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is it—was this a tradition in your family or were you the first to go to England for education?

**Kemi:**

It was a tradition, for the children of the upper classes. They would send their children to England, usually after they finished secondary school. They didn't usually send them to school that early. I don't know why my father made that decision. I had an older sister, who had finished her high school, and when she was ready to go to England in accordance with the tradition, my father insisted that I go with her. So, I was sent to school in England at the age of 10. It's not usual. It's usually after high school that they go for their postsecondary education, but I happened to have been sent at that early age.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Were there any other people you knew at that school? Was it...

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. There was some other Nigerian children there, that had come, but all of them were older than me. The other Nigerian children there were actually came to the secondary school whereas I spent two years in the primary school, so I was alone, in the primary school. And even though my parents had made an effort to teach me English, when I first got to the school, at the end of the first lesson, I said to the teacher, "Um, I haven't really understood [both laugh], what was said during the class, and, so, what they did was to give me private lessons, for about a month. Children pick up very easily and, so after a month I was willing to go back into the main class, but I continued the lessons and spoke in English. It was called "elocution" lessons, so I could speak like a proper British native [laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And you do have a British accent, do you?

**Kemi:**

Yes, and so, then I did all the, you know, the usual classic things. I had piano lessons. I had dancing lessons, and I did some acting. It was, I enjoyed it, it was great. My sister was there, so when we had midterms, I would go to London, because this was in a small village in Sussex, and so, midterm, I would go to my sister, and spend the midterm there, and...

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

The early 60's, this is?

**Kemi:**

This was, this was 1961.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Now, and then did you go back to Nigeria in the, in the school holidays?

**Kemi:**

Um, just once. I went only once, but my mother came, on two occasions, and then I went back home only once, and then I eventually went back in 1968. Then, I did the equivalent of the OAC, that prepped for the university, and then I went to University of Lagos.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**



Now, somewhere in there, you decided that you were going to become a lawyer, or did you—I know that there was lawyers in your family. Let's start there.

**Kemi:**

Okay, there were lawyers, yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Tell me about that.

**Kemi:**

So, my father was a lawyer, and so was his older brother. Law is a very popular profession with Nigerians, very, very popular. In the 50's, because my father was actually in England in the 50's, and in the 50's a lot of Nigerians were there to study law. At that time, you didn't have to have a law degree to become a barrister to be called to the bar in England. You just simply did the bar exams, and you were called to the bar, in, in any of the Inns of Court. So, my father doesn't have an LLB. He just simply did the bar exams. Some of them, some people did do the degree I think later, in the later years, people went to university to do the LLB and it became compulsory, and, as you know, in England, the profession is split into barristers and solicitors. Most Nigerians, did the barristers' work, very few of them did the solicitors' work, because, I guess, in Nigeria, at that time, there wasn't a lot of solicitors' work to be done. There were few corporations, private companies. The country was run by crown corporations at that time. There wasn't going to be that much commercial work to be done. So, most Nigerians, you know, were called to the bar in England and when they came to Nigeria, they didn't have to be called to the bar, because we didn't have a bar, you, it was still

part of the British system, and this continued to, I think around, 1964. After that, they established uh, all Nigerian bar, you know, and then people were called to that. So, you could be called to the bar in England, and when you came to Nigeria, you had to be called to the Nigerian bar as well.

So my father was a lawyer. His older brother was a lawyer. I have some step-brothers and sisters. When my stepbrother was 18 (he was much older than me), he was sent to England, and of course he did the LLB and was called to the bar in England. Then he came to Nigeria and he was the first set of people who had to go to the Nigerian law school. My sister who was in England at the time, when I was in England and I used to go to her midterm, she also studied law, but she didn't finish in England. She came back to Nigeria. So, she went to University of Lagos. So she's a lawyer, two of her children are lawyers, and, I'm very proud to say that I have a daughter who is a lawyer here. She was called to the bar two years ago.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Congratulations.

**Kemi:**

And so, she's the third generation, um...

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What is her name?

**Kemi:**

Her name is Bola, and we have the same last name. She practises with a law firm, here, in Barrie, HGR Graham Partners. So you know, she just started with them. She articulated with them, and they retained her after her articles.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Wonderful.

**Kemi:**

So, we are a big family of lawyers.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes, so, that answers the question, or does it?

**Kemi:**

No, I didn't actually want to be a lawyer. I thought everybody is a lawyer and I wanted to do something different [Allison laughs], and, having been to school in England I, actually wanted to go back to England and study what you call the triple classics, politics, philosophy and economics. That was the thing to do because I wanted to be, to work in the civil service and—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Did you want to work in the civil service in England?

**Kemi:**

No, in Nigeria.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

In Nigeria.

**Kemi:**

Yes, you see, I was brought up on the premise, on the understanding—I was born before Independence. Then the first set of Nigerians who took over the reins of government after Independence, my father was one of them. In Nigeria, the chief registrar of the superior courts is a lawyer, it's not an administrative position per se. You have to have practised law, and you could then run the courts. So, my father was the first person appointed as the chief registrar of the courts, to run it. So the idea of the upper class at that time was that you send your children to England, usually, so they could come, come back and basically work in the civil service and be part of government. So, that was what I had in mind, that I would either study that or, I was also interested in, sociology. So I thought, you know, I would, alternatively do sociology, and—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

But, what happened?

**Kemi:**

My father had died after I came back in 1968, so, of course, you know, funds had become limited, because my mother was basically a house wife. So, my sister had said,

it would be difficult to send me back to England, because, at that point in time, the Nigerian bank, or central bank, was now restricting transferring money abroad. Before, you could just go to the bank and buy the British pounds and send abroad. But, now you have to go through a lot of paperwork, and it took months and months, and my sister said, you know, it was going to be difficult if I wanted to go back to England. She said, “Why don’t you study here in the university that I went to, University of Lagos?” She said “It’s good. You’ve been there.” And I said “Yes.”

And so, after I finished my A levels, she said to me, “This is the brochure with all the courses that are available,” and she said to me, “With your personality, I don’t think you can really—I don’t think you would do well if you had to work with somebody all the time. I think that you should study anything you want, but it should be a professional course, because I know you, you can’t tolerate fools, and you’d always speak your mind.” [Participant Laughs]. And she said, “You should study something that’s a professional course, and if things go wrong in your employment you can always start up on your own.” So she gave me the brochure, and she said “These are your exam results. These are the subjects you’ve done. See where it fits in there.” The only thing I could really do from that [Participant Laughs], was law, that was a professional course. The other thing was accounting and I didn’t like figures. So, and I went back to her and I said, “Okay. How about if I study law?” Obviously, that’s what she wanted but she, she was very, very, tactful.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Smart.

**Kemi:**

She didn't push me into it because I would have pushed back. And so that's how I ended up going to University of Lagos and studying law, and I'm forever grateful that she steered me in the right direction.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Was it a good assessment of your personality?

**Kemi:**

Yes! [Allison laughs]. Definitely, definitely.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And was the law the right place then for a person of your personality? Like, did that...

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Yes. I enjoyed it. And of course, I did start out traditionally in that I started off with the Ministry of Justice. I was in the Attorney General's office, the prosecution division, and I did public prosecution, minor criminal offences. I did that for about two years. Then, after that I went to work in another government institution, but it was like a crown corporation. They managed properties, so I did a bit of commercial work there. I did that for another two or three years. Then, after that, I had an opportunity to start working in a bank as a junior counsel to the chief counsel. That's where I spent most of my career in Nigeria. So I didn't practise law for a very long time, for just a few years. I spent most of my career as in house counseling.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, was it just for a change that you moved into that, or, did you find the criminal side of things not as—

**Kemi:**

No. Well, I'd left the criminal and then I had done the commercial law, and the particular crown corporation that I was in, was dissolved, so I was unemployed, basically. So a friend told me that they had an opening at a what you call an investment bank. In fact, it was a bank that was owned by the Chase Manhattan Corporation. They came from America and invested in this investment bank, and, so, I got work there as a junior counsel and I found that I actually [laughs]—I had found my place. I enjoyed it tremendously, and I made a career there.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Now what is it that appealed to you so much, about that side?

**Kemi:**

[Pause] What I liked about it was that I was working with a group of highly intelligent and highly motivated young men, and when they wanted to do a banking transaction, they wanted to lend money to a big corporation, sometimes it's a multinational. I enjoyed sitting at the table as the transaction was put together. There was the challenge of—sometimes I would say, "Well, according to the banking law or company law or central bank regulations, you can't do this, or you can't do that," and they would say, "Well, this is a done deal. Find a way for us to do it." [Allison laughs]. So that, that mental challenge, I enjoyed it, and, as I said, there's nothing more rewarding than sitting down

with highly intelligent people and having those conversations, and, you know, trying to problem solve. It's easy to problem solve with people who are very intelligent, and you can talk to them, at the same, at the same level as you are mentally. I enjoyed that. I really, really loved it.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

That's interesting, and you mention that it was a group of men doing this, putting deals together, working in the banking. How unusual was it that you were a woman lawyer in Nigeria?

**Kemi:**

It wasn't unusual that I was a woman lawyer in Nigeria. The only time when—if you want to talk about the feminine aspect—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

I do.

**Kemi:**

Um, I'll go back to when I was called to the bar. We have a scheme in Nigeria that's called "National Youth Service Core", almost like the Peace Corps that the Americans have. So, what you do after you are finished university or you finish your professional exams, you would register with this organization, and you would be posted to another part of Nigeria, not your own area of origin, and you'd go there for one year. You'd spend one month at a boot camp, and then after that you'd be posted to any organization, and the government pays you some kind of a stipend. But you work for



them. You work for that organization for one year, and at the end of one year, they'll give you your discharge papers. The law said that no employer should employ somebody who hadn't gone through this.

So, when I finished, when I was called to the bar, and I signed up for this national service, I was sent to the eastern part of Nigeria. There, in the whole of that state, they didn't have ten female lawyers. [Pause] And that was difficult because in the office, the junior staff, the male junior staff, resented me and when I asked them to go and help me dig out some files from the archives, they didn't like taking orders from me [laughs]. So, that was the first time I came across that pushback. But, with my personality, I was able to cope because I just said to them, "You know, you have to do what I ask you to do. It's your job and you have to do it." So I was able to cope. Then, when I came back to Lagos, there were lots of women, female lawyers, so that issue didn't arise in the Ministry when I was there, or in the crown corporation when I was there.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

But the bank?

**Kemi:**

In the bank, there weren't that many female lawyers. But, where I ran into some resistance, was—the Americans don't go anywhere without their lawyers. So, when we had big loans coming up—what you call a syndication because, it was an investment bank, and we would go to the big multinationals who needed to raise funds and the amount of funds they needed to raise, our bank couldn't give them all that money, and it's not even wise, if we had that amount of money to give out; you have to spread your risks—so, we would invite other banks to join in this consortium to lend to this multinational, and because it was an American-owned bank, when the investment

bankers, when they went to these meetings or when they called a meeting in our own premises, I was always present, either myself or the senior counsel.

So, you would have a room full of 16 men, and I was the only lady there, and, everybody would go around the table. Each bank would say, “This is our commitment. These are the terms and conditions.” And, so, when it was our turn, the banker would say, “Our bank will participate for this amount of money, but these are the legal terms that we require, and our lawyer’s going to state it.” And the minute I opened my mouth I could actually see the men switch off. [pause] You know, what has a woman got to say? And I had to say to them, “The system in our bank is that if the legal department doesn’t sign off on the loan, the loan doesn’t get booked. So if you are not prepared to accept our bank’s legal position on this particular consortium, we won’t be taking part.” The banker would say, “That’s true. We can’t go ahead without our lawyers.”

So that’s when I met that resistance. One of the decisions I made at that time, was that I would always dress very severely. I will be very well dressed, but I wouldn’t wear a lot of jewelry. I wouldn’t wear bangles that were—when you were gesticulating, you’d be making noise. I wouldn’t wear anything that would reveal cleavage. I wouldn’t wear short skirts. I would wear tiny earrings. I found that that severe dressing was also important because I didn’t want to dress in a way that would distract from what I had to say.

I was the first female manager in that bank. Generally, working with the men, I didn’t have any problems because I had earned their respect because of my intellect. But when I went outside the bank for meetings, these people didn’t know me, they didn’t know my capability and so I met, some kind of prejudice there. But eventually, after five years, lots of other female lawyers came in. Incidentally, we have quite a few female chief executives of banks in Nigeria and one of them, I gave her first job.

### **Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Very good.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, yeah.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Just to back up a bit. So, does that mean that you changed your style, in order to facilitate—

**Kemi:**

No, I didn't really—having practised law, you couldn't, when you were robed, you couldn't wear—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No, no.

**Kemi:**

—you couldn't wear flashy things but, when I joined the bank I thought, oh, I'm liberated from wearing black every day [Allison laughs]. So when I first joined the bank I was wearing colourful clothes. It was still corporate, but it was when I met this resistance that I decided—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

—to really cut back on what I wore to work, and I made a conscious effort to make sure that I didn't wear anything that was, that would distract from what I had to say.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, you had found your niche, it sounds like.

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. I was very happy there. I enjoyed it.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, how did we get to Barrie?

**Kemi:**

Oh, Barrie. So, after 10 years in the banking industry, the industry was changing, banks were failing and I had moved from the original bank where I had started off. I was in this private bank and I wasn't happy there. So, I decided to set up at my law firm. But for that law firm, I was going to do strictly solicitor's work. I wasn't going to go back to the courtroom.

So, with my contacts in the bank industry, I was able to get a lot of work, mostly to do documentation for loans. I acted as a consultant for them for various things. And then, while I was still in the bank, while I was still employed, I had been asked to give a talk at a financial institution. It was set up by the central bank to do training for bankers,

and I was asked to give a talk there on the legal aspects of banking, what a banker should look for, what constitutes a good security for a loan, what to do when a loan goes bad, you know, the legal processes, and I found I was quite good at teaching!

So, I had done a few of that. When I set up my own law firm, I also set up a separate company and I approached the banks and I was very well received. So I started doing that for the banks. I would go in, they would gather their banking officers and I would teach them the banker-customer relationship, the duty for secrecy, when does the banking relationship begin and when does it end, the rights of the customer, the rights of the bank, at what point can you call a security, how you can call in a mortgage, so on and so forth. So, I then found that I was actually doing more of that than the practice. I also ran a few seminars for lawyers who wanted to advise banks or who worked in the banks, and it was very well received, so I found my passion in that and I did that, for several years.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What years are these?

**Kemi:**

1990, 1991.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You were about 30-ish.

**Kemi:**

Yes. 1991, and, the situation in Nigeria started to deteriorate, both the economic, situation, the security situation, and the schools. The universities were no longer as good as when I was in University of Lagos. [When I was a student], everything, the standard of education was very good. I remember that the lecturers, the professors, in the University of Lagos law school, when they would teach us, they would talk about English cases because it was based on English law. They would give you an English case to support their position and they would give you a Canadian case. They always cited Canadian authorities. They didn't talk about Australia, I mean we were all Commonwealth countries, but it was always Canada.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Why?

**Kemi:**

I think it's because they had a scheme where some of the lecturers did an exchange program and they had come to do part of their maybe Master's or PhD in Canada. And they would give us articles that were written by some Canadian authors, and things like that. So I'd heard about Canada and Canadian law when I was in university.

But when things started deteriorating in Nigeria, it was the school—I wanted to keep my children with me until they had finished high school, and in keeping with the tradition, they were to go to England for their postsecondary. I had actually put together some kind of education fund that I had been paying into in pounds, for England. But I found that, when the economy deteriorated, the amount of local money (which is called the 'naira') that I needed to get one British pound went from four naira to 20 naira to 30, to 40, so it was a moving target. And I thought, you know, if I send these children to England (and I have three children, two girls and a boy), how would I be able to pay their fees through university?

So I started looking abroad, to go and work abroad. I didn't actually think of living abroad. I wanted to go and work for the United Nations, and I discovered that I couldn't work as a lawyer in the United Nations because I had no international law experience. I only had the local experience. Then, I wanted to go work with the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, OPEC, because a Nigerian was now the secretary and he was putting the team together, so I had applied to go with him to Austria, but I didn't get that job.

Then one day, a friend of mine said, "Oh, I'm looking at *The Economist*, the magazine, and at the back they said you can immigrate to Canada if you had \$250,000 dollars in a business class." And I said, "\$250,000 dollars, I'm not worth that much, even if I sell my home and so on and forth. He sent me a copy of that advert and I took it to the Canadian High Commission in Lagos. I had gone to where they issue the visas. Somebody had said, "Well, this is a commercial transaction. Go upstairs," and I went upstairs and they said "No, this is for the visa department," and the lady said to me, "Do you want to go and live in Canada ?" and I said "Yes." I said, "But I'm not a business person." So she said, "What do you do?" I said, "I'm a lawyer". And she said, "Oh, you know, we would want people like that in Canada." So, I went down and I was told that I should come back for an information session. I went back three days later and collected the forms [laughs], and, within a week, I had signed the form. My husband had filled it in. I filled it in. I paid the processing fee. At that time, you had to pay not only just the application fee, but the right of landing fee. Every fee had to be paid and I think I must have put down about, \$1,300 dollars, U.S. dollars, for this processing. So I was waiting, and then there were elections in Nigeria which were the first fair elections that were conducted under the military. The military people refused to accept it, and there was a big, international scandal about it. The Canadian High Commission left, on their own. They left Lagos. They pulled out of Nigeria. So that, delayed my—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Sounds frightening.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, that delayed my application and the security situation got even worse. There was a day—I had a Nigerian driver and a car to take the children to school because you don't have a school bus as such, and the driver was bringing them back to my office. They had finished school. And there was an armed robbery attack, cars on the highway were stopped and they were systematically being attacked. The driver had the presence of mind to just leave the car and take the children and he hid them under the bridge, where they had stopped. My children came [to me] and they were very traumatized because there were gunshots and they had been shoved under this bridge. There was also somebody else there, who basically would hover over my children, they were holding them, you know, in case there was any stray bullet. And so, it was very traumatic for them. So, I had made up my mind that I was definitely going to, leave Nigeria.

So, why Barrie? my husband is a physician and he had gone to medical school with a gentleman who lives and works in Barrie. They had kept up their friendship after medical school. This gentleman had come to Canada in 1979 to do his postgraduate in anesthesiology. So, he never came back. He stayed. He got married and every year he would come home to Nigeria on holidays to see his aging parents, and they would come to our house. So we had kept up that friendship. So when I had applied to come to Canada, I said to myself, after about six months, "Wait a minute, you want to go and live in a country you've never visited?" [laughs] And this lady had always invited me to come to Canada, and I said, "Canada, what's in Canada? We go to the States, we go to England, go to Spain, go to Europe. What's in Canada?" So, I wrote to them and I said "I want to come to Canada on holidays." And so, I came in 1996 for a holiday.

They live in Barrie. So, I looked at it and I said, "I like this. I don't want to live in a city anymore." I looked at Toronto, it was nice, but I liked this place. It had a slower pace



of life. And so I said, “Definitely, when my papers come through I will come and settle in Barrie.” So, in 1998, when the papers finally came through, I came with the children and I stayed with them [my friends], because they have a huge home just outside of Barrie, enough to accommodate me and the three children. So we stayed with them for a couple of months. Then we rented a townhouse and the children were put in school and I was quite happy that my children settled down without any problem. I was a bit apprehensive that there was going to be—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

They were how old?

**Kemi:**

The eldest, a girl, she’s 16.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is that Bola?

**Kemi:**

No, that’s Shola. Then the second one is Bola. She was 14. So she was lucky because she came into the beginning of grade nine, high school. The older one was put into grade 11, and she had a lot of difficulty making friends, because, by that time, they had formed their cliques, and she was a very shy girl. But Bola, apparently, in grade nine, because the children come from different feeder schools, that’s when the new alliances and new cliques are made, so she became part of a group, a new group that was

formed. It's very interesting that there are eight of them, and, to date, they're still together. They are still friends, and they still meet up with each other.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And your son?

**Kemi:**

My son was 11. He celebrated his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday a couple of weeks after we got here. So, he went into grade seven, that would be, because he spent two years there, and he settled down quite well. But I was apprehensive that there would be problems or be issues, and so that's why at first I wasn't interested in working. I did find out what I needed to do to be certified here. But I didn't want to do anything like that for the first year because I wanted to be available for them if there was going to be an issue. Then, after a year I looked at what I needed to do to, to be accredited, and what was required. The way it was put is that in order to upgrade your LLB to be the equivalent of the Canadian LLB, you needed to get in touch with an organization called the National Committee on Accreditation. You would send in your papers and they would assess what you needed to do. Invariably, they would ask most people to go study eight subjects, go pass eight subjects at the university level, and after that they will give you a certificate which you then take to the Law Society, saying you now have an education that's equivalent to a Canadian LLB. So, when I looked at it— eight subjects—I was [laughs] a little bit resentful. I thought, this wasn't fair, and I think it was the way it was put across—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You mean formally on paper, or personally by somebody you spoke to?

**Kemi:**

It was on paper. They would assess you, and they would say, “You need the following documents in order for you to have the equivalent of a Canadian LLB.” That was the way it was put and I didn’t like it. I didn’t understand it. It was not until after I had done the bar admission course that I realized that it was necessary. Even though Canada and Nigeria and all these Commonwealth countries have the same basic law, of course, the laws have developed at different rates. I found that the subjects that I had done in Nigerian law school, the areas of law had developed much more than what had happened in Nigeria, and so it was basically—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Just based on the economic situation?

**Kemi:**

]

Also, of course, the Canadian constitution you have to do that because it’s different. Canadian tax laws are different, but I find things like trusts, one of the subjects, trusts and the way it had developed in Canada was much, much, much bigger than what I had done in Nigeria. Anyway, so I saw that and you had to pay about \$400 dollars per subject, if you wanted to study the subject at home and do the challenge exams, or you could register with the university and then attend with the other students. But the universities wanted \$1,200 dollars per subject and I had eight subjects to do. So I thought, you know what, I’m not even sure if I wanted to be a lawyer here. I have been a lawyer for close to, what, 20 years, and I thought, maybe I’ve reached this stage where I could do something else. So I started to apply for work on the basis that I had a degree, not law, and I found that I could not get work. There is a terrible bar for anybody who is

27 of 83

looking for work who has no Canadian experience, and it's taken to the level of something that's ridiculous, because there are certain things that are international. The floors all over the world are the same. You don't need to have Canadian experience to clean floors, and things like that. But you found that at every turn, always, you didn't have Canadian experience.

So I said, I've worked in a bank. I enjoyed it. Maybe I'll go and work in a bank. So, I registered for this thing that's called a Canadian securities course. When you pass that, you get a licence to be a stockbroker. You can then sell mutual funds. So, I studied that on my own, and I passed the exam first time. So I got work at the CIBC which is just [nearby] on the high road, but when I got there, the banking [laughs] that I had to do was different, because now, everything in banking was automated. You just fill in the names of the person, the SIN number, their income, their expenses, and when you put in the amount of loan they apply for, you just press a button and it tells you, "declined" or "accepted."

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No discretion, and no—

**Kemi:**

So there was no discretion. But what they wanted me to do was basically to raise funds. I had a target of \$50,000 a month, either in the form of a mortgage, RRSP's, term deposits and so on and so forth, in this tiny town, one person. So they trained me for six months and I made some attempts, but there was no way I was going to do that [laughs]. So after six months I gave up and then I decided, okay, I'll go and do the courses and get certified.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

This was around, 2000, 2001, somewhere in there?

**Kemi:**

Yeah, around 2000.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Now, you mention looking for work, what about teaching? Your passion before. Had you considered that?

**Kemi:**

I did but the issue was always, “You don’t have Canadian experience. You don’t have Canadian experience.”

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You don’t mention discrimination based on colour. Did you think that came into it at all or do you think it was—?

**Kemi:**

You know, in order to be a happy and content person, and to have a balanced life, it’s never something that I put—it’s never in the forefront of my mind. I trained my children that way. My children will tell you that they didn’t suffer discrimination in school, because they weren’t looking for it. If my son didn’t make the hockey team, or whatever team, you try harder. They didn’t suffer from discrimination. My son, in fact, was the

class valedictorian, in the high school that he went to here. I never look for discrimination unless it's overt, unless somebody actually comes out and says to me, "You're Black," whatever. That's when it's in my face and I would react. But I tend not to take any action, or any rejection, I don't look at it on the basis of discrimination, because if I did, I'd be miserable, and I would interpret every action as based on that and I'd just be miserable. For me, if somebody has a prejudice against Black people or any kind of race, they really have that problem. It's their problem, not me. So, I refuse to be unhappy because somebody has a prejudice or they have a feeling, because when I walk into a room and you feel bad because I'm Black or you feel angry, that's your problem. Why would I be miserable at that point in time, because you have that problem? As I said, I never, I have never come across any overt racism since I've lived in Barrie. Except once, and it wasn't directed towards me, it was directed towards my client. But, for me personally, I can't say to you there was an incident where somebody did something to me because of prejudice, because I wasn't looking for it. And so I can quite comfortably say, as far as I am concerned in Barrie, I've never suffered it. My children have never come home and said to me, "Somebody called me by a rude name," or "I didn't get something, because I am Black." Not in Barrie. Not with my kids. Some children or some people may have experienced it but I haven't.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is there much of a Black community in Barrie, population?

**Kemi:**

Yes, yes. It's getting bigger because housing is cheaper here as compared to Toronto. So you have people living here and then going to work in Toronto. Interestingly, the Nigerian community (when I came here), there was that couple that I stayed with, myself and maybe one other couple, but my understanding is that you have upwards of

20 to 30 Nigerian families here now. I don't interact with them. I only interact with the couple that I stayed with and one other couple. And they've left now. They've gone to Saskatchewan. The husband is a lawyer [both laugh]. I helped him through the process of recertification.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Oh, good for you.

**Kemi:**

And then he got work in, I think, their stock exchange in Saskatchewan.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, to go back to the accreditation process. When you chose Barrie

**Kemi:**

Hmm, hmm.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

—and Canada, it really wasn't on the basis of your future as a lawyer, particularly.

**Kemi:**

No. No, I was—I came here basically for my children.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

For your children.

**Kemi:**

And, obviously, I had to have something doing. So I didn't come to Canada to practise law. I came to Canada to give my children a good education because my parents having given me that, I thought, I owed them. I wanted my children to have an internationally recognized education, what you call a world class education. So that, the world, I realized very early that the world was getting smaller, and they didn't necessarily have to live in Nigeria. I wanted them to be citizens of the world and I thought if they had a world class education, then they could go anywhere in the world and find work.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So now you're coming back into the legal field and you're in Barrie.

**Kemi:**

Hmm, hmm.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What did you imagine that you were going to be doing?



**Kemi:**

I thought that after I had been called to the bar, I would have to go and find work in Toronto. What was I going to do here [in Barrie], and how would I even have a basis for clients? And, in fact, I was asking around, looking for where I was going to establish my office and I was thinking, how I was going to commute from here to Toronto.

I used to attend a church that's just by the road opposite the TD there, and I met a Black couple who had just moved to Barrie, and they said "Oh, when we bought our house here, the lawyer who had done the closing was a Black lady and she was very pleasant. They gave me her name and her telephone number, and I phoned her and she said, "Come over."

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Who was that?

**Kemi:**

Her name is Rose Adams, and her office is just further down there. So I spoke to her and she said, "Oh, you can find work. You don't have to go to Toronto," and she offered me a room in her office. She told me to go to the courthouse and ask for the head of duty counsel, the supervisor for duty counsel for family law. She said to me, "In Barrie, there are only two areas of law where you can be sure to have constant clients, family law and criminal law." And I said "Mm, I don't like criminal law [both laugh]." And she said, "Well, there's plenty of work in family law." I didn't understand why at the time there was plenty of work [laughs]. So, she put me through, I had her office, I registered with legal aid, and so people would get a legal aid certificate and contact me, and then I registered to the duty counsel which meant that I would give the supervisor, a month ahead, the dates when I was available. And they would put me on duty at any of the

33 of 83

four courts that we have in Simcoe county, so that's Barrie, Midland, Orillia and Collingwood. You could be on duty in any of those courts, and you are paid per hour based on the number of hours you do per day. So, some of the work we do, you could be there until 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock. if it's a simple advice session, it's just three hours. It varies. But that was a steady income because at least you knew you would get paid.

Then there was the legal aid certificates, which took longer, but again, you'd get paid but you'd get paid very little. Now, I think it's just under \$90 dollars an hour whereas the minimum you would do as a lawyer is \$175, \$250 an hour, but the difference was that you were sure you'd get your money. But the rates were very, very low. So that's what I did, when I was called to the bar. I was pleasantly surprised. I stayed with Rose Adams, for about—I was called to the bar in January, 2004, and I stayed with her until September, and then I got these offices and I was here until June, this year, when I finally closed the office.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Continuing the same work, mostly family?

**Kemi:**

Yeah, and then I added immigration to it. And it was quite successful. I actually stopped taking family law certificates. I continued to do the duty counsel because once you had finished for the day, you didn't have to carry the files. They were only your clients for the day. You didn't have to deal with the files afterwards and I had started to tail off on taking files from family law. I was concentrating on the immigration, and the immigration was the spousal sponsorship. I was pleasantly surprised. I thought that there was going to be more of that in Toronto, people, immigrants, trying to bring in their family. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that there were a lot of Canadian men who would go on holidays to the Caribbean and would want to marry the local girls, not understanding

why the local girls want to marry them. I was pleasantly surprised to find quite a few of them and work on their files. And there were Americans, too, who wanted to sponsor their spouse. I even did one for a couple where the wife was 68 and her husband was 67. They had been going back and forth and the wife decided she wanted to stay in Canada. And I was doing very well with that, and I would have continued, except that I got a job in Nigeria.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, I want to ask you about that, but let's keep going, back in Canada for a moment. So, you learned a lot about Canada, I guess, through the law, and through your practice did you, or not?

**Kemi:**

Yes. I learned a lot about Canada, also through my church, the community.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What church is that?

**Kemi:**

The church is an Anglican Church. It's called Trinity Anglican Church [on Collier Street, around the corner from the office.] I found them to be very embracing, loving. We were warmly welcomed. My children had the children's Sunday school and things, and we thrived there. But there was something, an issue came up, between the parishioners and the bishop in Toronto, and so a group of us left that church and we set up church

within Barrie here, and the church is [still] part of the Anglican network, but it's different from the other one. Most of us from this particular parish established that new one.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And that church is important to you still?

**Kemi:**

Oh, yeah. The church is a very important part of my life, because they support me, and they support my children. They are a wonderful group if you have any problems, if you want anything done in your home, they are always there. So that's been an important part, for me, and it's been part of my love for Canada. The people here are warm, they are kind. The only negative I've had is that it's difficult to find work [because of] this non-Canadian experience [requirement]. But, for everything else, Canadians are so warm and gentle and kind. But they fail to appreciate that somebody coming from abroad—that foreign experience would only enhance the workplace, not makes it worse.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Do you think that you bring that perspective gained from a completely different life before, to the law here, in your practice. Did it help, or...

**Kemi:**

Um, [pause] I will tell you, family law—I've struggled a lot, not in terms of the law, but I struggled a lot, because the way you practice family law is not just law. There is a lot of personal issues and emotional issues there, and what I struggled with is that I have slightly different values. The issue in Nigeria—it's not really accepted for you to have

three children by three different men. You know, the society will actually tell you that what you are doing is wrong. And also, we have a culture, it may be right or wrong, where you are encouraged to make the relationship work. So, you don't leave your husband or your partner at the slightest thing. So, I found it difficult when women would come to me and they say, "It was an abusive relationship," and I'd say, "OK, give me examples of your abuse?" I'm not talking about physical telling or physical abuse, of course, even in Nigerian society it's not accepted. But little things like if he forgot my birthday, he doesn't give me messages from my friends, he puts down my religion, and things like that. I kind of struggled a little bit with that, um...

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

How did you work it out for you? How did you manage to deal with that kind of conflict, between—

**Kemi:**

No, I mean I kept it within myself and I fought for them. It's funny, as a lawyer, I can fight very strongly and aggressively for my clients, but on a personal basis I tend to avoid conflict. But I have no problem with going head to head and really fighting for my clients. But in my mind I used to think, Maybe you could have—but I can't say anything to be politically correct. So I have struggled a lot with that in terms of the values.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Have your values changed at all, or no?

**Kemi:**

No, it hasn't. It has not changed. And sometimes, what I struggle with is—the way I see it is that some of these restrictions that you have in society, you may think, Oh, it's my life and I should be able to do what I want, but what I find, is that, sometimes these restrictions, as unpleasant as they can be sometimes, is also a form of protection. I see it that absolute freedom can also lead to a lot of pain. I had an issue once, where a baby was apprehended from the hospital by the CAS [Children's Aid Society] because the baby was born addicted to drugs. The CAS within five days must come to court to get a proper authority to keep that child. So they came, I think, the next day, and I had to represent the mother and the boy, and the parents of the young woman came. The [grand]parents, they were very, very angry, they were furious, and, and I explained to them that, "You're not likely to be given that child, that baby, today. They took the baby two days ago." I said, "The child is addicted to drugs. They have to wean the child off the drugs, by giving the child methadone drops. They have foster mothers who have been trained for that, and they can't hand over the child even to the grandparents, because you have to be cleared, police records and so on and so forth before they can give you that baby, whereas this foster mother has been trained. That baby needs to go through that process." They were so angry.

Because a lot of people don't understand what a duty counsel is. They think that you are not a lawyer, you're just acting as a lawyer. Or if they believe you're a lawyer, they believe that you're not good enough, that's why you're doing it, they don't know that you actually have your own practice. So, they said to me, "We are looking for a lawyer. We are going to go and fight this." And I said to them, I couldn't help myself—I said to them, "You know, you may be better off spending that money taking your daughter to a rehab, rather than spending that money on a lawyer, because if you go to a lawyer, you could spend upwards of \$5,000, \$6,000 dollars. If you bring a motion tomorrow, no judge is going to say, 'Okay, that child should be handed back to your daughter, or even to you,' because if anything goes wrong, that judge would be on the line. His career would be on the line. So, you need to work with the CAS. You, eventually, as a grandparent, of course, they would want to give you the baby, but you

need to work with them, and put all the checks and balances in place. But the money you are going to spend on a lawyer, go and get your daughter the treatment.” Where I come from, you know, we would blame the daughter more for doing something like that to an innocent child, rather than blaming the authority that’s trying to help.

So that I struggle with, because I guess we’re more strict, in that sense, and we don’t believe that as a girl should just go with anybody that you want, and have children. So I kind of struggle with that.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

As you say, that’s your particular response to your clients and their situations, as opposed to how you handle their issues. That’s not an issue for you?

**Kemi:**

Yeah, I would always say, “Yes, you’ve been abused and I’ll fight for you.” And I enjoyed it when a woman who had been abused and terrorized gets what’s due to her, because sometimes they come to me, and by the time I’ve told them what they are entitled to, what we’re going to do, they say, “You know, I’m going to sleep better tonight.”

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

A great reward.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, so I enjoy that. It’s only in areas, that situation where you should go and get your child help—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

—rather than trying to fight the courts.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You mentioned that in Nigeria, the profession of law is very popular, and I presume, high status.

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What do you think people think of lawyers here compared to in Nigeria?

**Kemi:**

People don't like lawyers [laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Here?



**Kemi:**

Yeah, and also in Nigeria. They don't like lawyers. [pause] I don't know why it is but they don't like lawyers here, because the profession is highly regulated and I think the public is very well protected, better than Nigeria. So I don't know why people would not like lawyers here, but I find that they don't like lawyers. I think they resent the amount of money they have to spend. Access to justice is very expensive here. People don't realize that it's not the fault of the lawyers. It's expensive. The business of lawyers is expensive, the expense of maintaining an office, paying your taxes and fees, your insurance, just generally maintaining—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Being open.

**Kemi:**

Yeah. And then, people also, when they spend all that amount of money and they don't get what they want, they blame the lawyers. But I think the public is very well protected by the Law Society here. There's a lot of controls, better than what you have in Nigeria. People are at least lucky here, that if there is any severe wrongdoing, they can get some form of compensation, I really admire that.

But, people believe it because they don't always have a realistic view of what they can have and what they can't have. Like I said to that family, "You can't win that case if you get a lawyer, because no judge is going to hand over a baby that's in that situation." So, if I hadn't said that, and they had got a lawyer and spent \$5,000 dollars, and they still didn't get the child, there's that resentment. So I think it's important for you

to manage your client's expectations. But sometimes you tell them, and they say, "No. I want to pursue it. I want to go ahead."

But in Nigeria there isn't that much regulation and they don't like lawyers in certain circumstances. In other circumstances, they are happy to have them to defend them from various government actions or cases—I'm talking about Nigeria. But they don't complain so much about the fees. I think they accept that in Nigeria, the higher the stakes, the more the fees, but here, there's that resentment. But as I said, the Law Society does a great job of protecting the public.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

When did you learn that, that, for instance, the profession is much more tightly regulated here? Was that through the accreditation process or afterwards?

**Kemi:**

No. [During] the accreditation, I didn't have any contact with anybody.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You did it on your—

**Kemi:**

Yeah, I did it on my own, and all I was doing was basically, the—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

The eight courses.

**Kemi:**

Yes, but it was the subjects. There wasn't anything about professional conduct.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Right, the content of the law is what—.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, so it was just strictly the law. It was when I went to the Law Society and then we did the bar admission courses. Each time, there was always the rules of professional conduct.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

It was always introduced into every aspect of the subject, and you had the whole thing. That was when I realized it was heavily, heavily regulated. Then, of course, within the first year of my coming into practice, they had a practice management audit for me. The lady was very helpful. She made sure I realized that it wasn't like I was being policed, that it was an examination to help me manage my practice better.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is that what happened?

**Kemi:**

Yes, she looked at my file and she said, “Yes, this is okay, but I’d also advise that you do this, or, in accordance with the rules of the professional conduct you should actually have this in place.” They also included my contingency planning for if I fell sick or I died and I had to appoint a person to be power of attorney over my trust accounts. Then I had to have a lawyer who had an idea of what was going on in my office and I had some little blurbs on the files so that somebody could take over, in case of an emergency.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

It must have been such a lonely time though, for you, doing these courses individually. And then coming into the bar admission course, that would be a completely different world, was it?

**Kemi:**

Yes, it was, it was lonely for me because, I was studying on my own here, and then I’d go to Toronto for the exams. So, while I was studying I didn’t have anybody to discuss with.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No.

**Kemi:**

But after I had done a couple of exams, I got to meet other people, so I did have a little bit, but not much.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

A little bit of study group, or anything?

**Kemi:**

No, nothing.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No?

**Kemi:**

Because I was here.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

And the study group, they had them in Toronto. So I had to do it all on my own. The only thing is, when I went for the exams, if I met somebody who had already done a previous exam, I would say, "You know, what were the areas of emphasis?" And stuff. But I did

everything on my own. In the Barrie library, they have a few private rooms, they knew me there [Allison laughs] quite well. I thought it was a good example for my children, that even at 50, that I could, that I would do this.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You had the chops.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, that it's important, life is lifelong learning, you always do it, and you have to do whatever you need to do in order to succeed. So they saw me going back to school, while they were at school, in order to do this, and I thought, that was a very good example.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Really, it was a new career in many ways, wasn't it?

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Compared to banking and the law.

**Kemi:**

Yes, it was. And I had to deal with a different set of people [laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Totally.

**Kemi:**

It wasn't the investment bankers. I'm adaptable. When something has to be done, I will adapt myself and do it, and not just bemoan the situation.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

I see that. Now, if you ran the world, would you change the accreditation process? What would you do?

**Kemi:**

Having gone through it, I think it needs to be explained. Although it seems obvious that it's important for you to redo the subjects because the Canadian law is so different, so it's more saying, update you to the Canadian law...

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

As opposed to a rejection of what you already know.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, it's just saying in order to bring your LLB to the level of a Canadian degree. Yeah, but how do you do that? You do those subjects. But I thought, for me, it would have been nice if they had just said, "Although this is a Commonwealth country and the basic principles are the same, however, Canadian law has in some ways developed in different directions, and in order for you to, to bring you up to speed on it..." you know. And then, another problem, but I don't know, is that it can be a bit expensive. When I did it, it was \$400 dollars per subject, and all you get for that is just four or five pages, that's the syllabus, and you've got to buy the books. That's all they give you, and then, you take the exams at the Law Society. I didn't even know that they could arrange for me to have taken the exams at Georgian College.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Really?

**Kemi:**

Somebody could have booked it. I didn't know that I didn't have to travel all the way to Toronto. But I don't know what can be done about the cost. It's more than that now. It's probably around \$500 or \$600 dollars per subject. But, I wouldn't change that because it's important for you to actually go through those subjects.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, it was worthwhile.

**Kemi:**

It was worthwhile.



**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And you did learn something as well.

**Kemi:**

Of course.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

As well as getting your qualifications.

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. To me, afterwards I realized I there is no way I would have been able to cope. So it was a good thing. I was able to cope with the topics at the bar admission program.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What else about that, your bar admission course? Did you go in and out every day from home?

**Kemi:**

Yes, I had to travel to Toronto every day. I liked the fact that they had classes, for us, for foreigners, it's important to have had those classes. What you've read and what they're teaching you, to have an opportunity to discuss and clarify things. My daughter, when

she did the bar exams, they no longer had classes. They just give her two huge binders. “Read it, and go and do the exams.”

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Somebody who also had to go through that process of accreditation would not be going through the classes that you went through?

**Kemi:**

No. They no longer offer classes for the bar admission. The bar admission now is just two books.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes, wow.

**Kemi:**

And you just sit at home and study that and go and do the exams. It was easy for my daughter, don’t forget, she had the basic knowledge, and she had gone through—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Of course.

**Kemi:**

—that before. But, somebody—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Like you.

**Kemi:**

But if I had to do that, I don't think I could. We had single subjects, I think there were, what, 12, or was it 10? We spent four or five days [on each subject], then we did the exams. But with them, everything is compressed and they do one exam, the barristers, and they do another exam, the solicitors, and it's just compressed. I don't know how somebody coming from abroad could cope with that. For instance, I had never done an exam where you do the objective—where you have all these subjects. For us, law had always been, you write a story [laughs], so now they give you multiple choice. So, I think it's going to be hard the way that it's set up now, the bar admission program, the way it's set up it would be hard for somebody coming in from abroad.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

You mentioned that you helped somebody get through it too.

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Tell me about that.

**Kemi:**

When I came here, I registered with the YMCA Immigration Services, because they said they'll help you through the system. And of course, the lady said, "You are a lawyer. This is what you need for your accreditation." I said, "Yes, I was aware of it but maybe I could do something else." She tried to help, but it didn't go through. But she was interested in me, and she kept in touch with me over the years, at the Immigration Services.

So I reported to her my progress of what I was doing, when I started the accreditation, when I was called to the bar. So when this young couple came—the husband is a lawyer—they also registered with the agency. They tried to find work for the wife and also for him to do something. It was in that process that they got my name, and he phoned me, so I just mentored him through the process, and if he had questions, I would help him. It was difficult for him.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Where was he from?

**Kemi:**

From Nigeria as well. But you know, he had a lot of experience. I mean, he wasn't as old as I am, but he's had over 10 years experience. At that time too, my daughter was now going through that process, so she also got him what you call summaries and things, and so I just, basically, just urged him on, encouraged him.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

A very important thing, isn't it?

**Kemi:**

Yes, yes, and telling him that at the end of the tunnel there is a light there and there will be a rainbow, you know.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

It's coming. Yes. we left your husband, doing medicine in Nigeria in our story so far.

**Kemi:**

Mm.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is he here, or?

**Kemi:**

No. What had happened was that he never wanted to come to Canada. But I told him that there was no life there. Doctors weren't getting paid. He had a little clinic and he wasn't making enough to even support us in Nigeria. So when I left, I think after five years, he realized he couldn't cope. So he decided to come to Canada and I sponsored him.

I had actually asked him in 1990. He came to Canada to visit this couple [the friends I spoke of before].

I said, "Ask about how you could get into the system." But the friend said to him, "Oh, it's quite difficult to get into the system." Because my husband wasn't really interested in it, he just said, "Okay," and he came back and said, "He said it's difficult."

Anyway, he came. When he came he was already over 50. He got in touch with the Ontario Medical Association. He had to do what they call an evaluation exam. So, the Canadian Medical Association certified that he had the right qualifications, but in order to practise, you have to get the certification from the province, any of the provinces. So, he tried Ontario, and they said, "Well, you have to do an exam. It's called a qualifying exam, and there's no pass or fail. After that exam, we'll determine whether you can practise, whether you could practise under supervision, whether you have to go back and do your specialty, or whatever, residency." What they've done for 90 percent of them, is to say, even if you are a doctor, a surgeon, a specialist, 20, 30 years experience, apparently, the Canadian body is different [laughs], they send them all back to do the residency. My husband was prepared to do it, but they had only 100 spaces, or 150, and you'd have 1500 of them do the exam, and so it wasn't pass or fail. So, he spent four years doing this. Eventually we were told that what they look at, apart from passing the exam is, where you did your degree, and your age. There was no point in putting somebody in the system who, in the next 10 years, would retire.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

How terribly frustrating.

**Kemi:**

Yes. So, after four years, he also tried some other provinces. It was the same thing. So somebody then told him, that they needed doctors in Australia and he didn't have to go through all that. They just had to do a test of English, this TOEFL, pass the test of

English. That was all they had to do. So he got work in Australia, but, of course, they sent him to the outback where the Aboriginals are. But things had gone wrong by that time, the four years he was here, and of course, we were separated after that. So, he is still in Australia.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Do you still have family in Nigeria?

**Kemi:**

Yes, because in Nigeria, there aren't that many cities, so we are still closely knit. So, when you say, "Do you have family?" for me, family doesn't mean my mother and father, brother and sister. For us, that's not family. It extends very far. My parents are long dead. My sister, that's the lawyer, she's dead. But my brother who's a lawyer, he's still alive, and I have two more siblings after her, who are there in Nigeria. But, you see, for me, that's not family. It's not.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And so who is your family there?

**Kemi:**

You now have your cousins.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Okay.

**Kemi:**

And your cousins to the 20<sup>th</sup> degree are family. So, if I want to do anything, like a wedding for my child, or if there is a death or anything, I will assemble not less than 300 people who are family.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

That's different from Barrie.

**Kemi:**

Yeah. That's what I would do. If tomorrow, one of my girls is getting married and I go to Nigeria, I can assure you, there'll be lots of other people, I can rustle up 300 people on both my mother and my father's side as family.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You're a Nigerian citizen as well?

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**



—as a Canadian? How, how do you identify yourself? Do you say you're a Nigerian Canadian? A Canadian? An Ontarian? [laughs]

**Kemi:**

It depends. [laughs]

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Here, what do you say?

**Kemi:**

Nobody asks me what my citizenship is. They ask me—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Well, no, your identity, then.

**Kemi:**

Yeah. They ask me, "Where are you from?" And I say, "I'm from Nigeria." But when they ask my daughter, "Where are you from?" she resents that.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

She says she's a Canadian.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, she accepts the fact that she was born in Nigeria and she's a Nigerian, but she resents—she doesn't want to be asked. She wants to be accepted as a Canadian whereas I don't have a problem saying I am Nigerian or I came from Nigeria. I don't mind being identified as that, but I think my children want to be identified as Canadians. They don't deny their Nigerian heritage. If my son walked in here and started talking to you, you wouldn't know that he wasn't born in Canada. You can tell from the way I speak but you wouldn't know because he came here when he was ten, eleven.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

And he's completely Canadian in his views and his outlook. He's completely Canadian. My middle child, Bola, she is able to straddle both cultures comfortably, and, when she goes to Nigeria, in a day or two she starts to speak English in the Nigerian sense. She loses her Canadian accent. My older daughter, again, because she was 16 when she came, she can straddle both worlds. But they still prefer to identify as Canadian, because they grew up, their important years were in Canada. Unlike me, I was in my late 40's when I came here. So, I'm happy to say I'm from Nigeria. But, they're not, you know [laughs], in that sense.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

But you, you're literally a Nigerian Canadian lawyer because you were called to the bar in both places, weren't you?

**Kemi:**

Yes, and I pay my dues, I still keep it up.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Are there very many Nigerian Canadian lawyers?

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes?

**Kemi:**

Yes, yes. The lady who now uses this office, she is a Nigerian, and, she was in—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Would you know that community, for instance? Is that an interest of yours, to be involved at that kind of a...

**Kemi:**

No. I just happened to know a few of them. And that's it. If I had been practising in Toronto, I would have had more interaction with them. But I have no dealings. I only met

this lady because somebody referred her to me and asked me to mentor her, and I mentored her when she was practising family law. And I told her as I was winding down that—she was complaining in Toronto, people go to their own ethnic groups. It's very difficult to build a practice unless you are in a big firm, but as an individual practitioner, you tend to get people from your own ethnic group. So she was struggling with this, and I said, "Well, there's plenty of work here".

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And you don't find that same breakdown of the profession here, or clients?

**Kemi:**

No. They don't have much of a choice [Allison chuckles] for family law, because now, I realize why. Family law is very stressful. And that's why a lot of people don't do it, and that's why I have people come to me when I'm duty counsel and say, "I have a certificate from the Legal Aid to get a lawyer. I can't find a lawyer." Because it's very, very stressful. When I practised, I never had more than 10 to 12 clients at a time. I couldn't cope with all that [pause]

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Pain?

**Kemi:**

Yes. And also, they are very needy. It's not their fault, but they're very needy. What you find is that, when there's a breakup of a relationship, one of the parties (it could be the mother or the dad), they use the children as a weapon to hurt the other person. So, you

find either the woman is not allowing the man to see the children, or he's not paying the support that he should pay. They phone you and say, "You know, the power has been cut off. I can't pay for my utilities because he's not paying." And things like that. Or, "He's taken the children and he's not returning them. They are missing school." And you have to go and do a quick motion to get the children returned to their mother, or to their dad, depending on who had custody. So they constantly need something. They are always in pain. There is no way that that doesn't affect you. So I didn't used to take more than twelve clients at a time. I would supplement my income with the duty counsel work. And then I started to wean myself off of it by doing the immigration, which was quite successful.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And not as hard on you.

**Kemi:**

Yes, not as hard on me. You are trying to reunite two lovers [both laugh]. So, that's—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

It's much more pleasant.

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes. In part of the application, they have to state what's the relationship, and who met who, and how did you meet, and tell the story of how your relationship developed, and so I get to see the love story [Allison laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, despite that, you've been winding your practice down. Tell me about that and your decisions.

**Kemi:**

Yeah, I had to do that, because in December 2010—okay, let me go back. When I was in the banking industry, eventually I became the head of the legal department. So, I had a lot of lawyers under me.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Of the bank?

**Kemi:**

Of the bank, yes. Then, what would happen is that we would have these people who were doing the national service, come and work at the bank. We had, maybe two or three permanent lawyers but we supplemented with the people who did the national service to do some of the work.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

The same [national] service [programme] that you did?

**Kemi:**

Yeah, that I did.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes, I understand.

**Kemi:**

So, we had people come, I had two, I had a girl from the north, her father was the Chief Justice of Nigeria. Then I had another girl who came from the east. They were doing their national service with me. Then, after we had taken these people in, and it was about a month later, I got to hear that there was a young man who was also doing the national service but he came in late, and he was posted to another part of the bank, I think the human resources department. I said this wasn't fair, that, as a lawyer, he should get a chance to practise. He's just been called to the bar. He shouldn't be put in the human resources department. So I fought for him to be transferred to the legal department, and I found him to be extremely bright. The other two girls were kind of laid back [Chuckles], but he was very intelligent.

So, every morning I'd give him the bulk of the work. After two months, he said, "Oh, my mother would like to meet you." I thought, That's very odd. It's unconventional and I don't think it's right. This is a work environment. I said, "What's the problem? What's the issue?", and he said "Oh, she just likes to meet you because, she's very happy that you've taken me in hand." I said "Okay," but I didn't think it was right, so I didn't go. But, eventually, they got me around, because I think they were celebrating something and I got invited to their home. I think it was the father celebrating a significant birthday, and he had invited other members of the bank to come in and celebrate with his family. So I got to meet the mother and she said, "Oh, I want to thank you. You know, you've taken my son in hand, and he's very serious now, and every morning he wakes up and he wants to get to work on time, and he's always talking about you." I said, "Oh, thank you, it's my pleasure. Your son is a pleasure to work with."

63 of 83

So he finishes his service, and just as he finishes, I leave that bank to go to another bank, so I take him with me as a legal officer. And from there, he said he was more interested in banking than law, and he left me and joined a bank, as a banking officer. They were going to train him. That was how we separated, but I kept in touch with his mum, and, to cut a long story short, I phoned him December 2010—I always phoned him once a year, because his mum asks me. She says, “You should keep in touch with him.”—I phoned him to wish him compliments of the season. It was already after Christmas. I phoned his mum and I phoned him. And he said, “Oh, I have something to discuss with you. Would you like to come to Nigeria? It’s not something you can discuss over the phone.” And I said, “Yeah, okay. I can do that.” This was December. I said, “But I have a lot of cases for January. Maybe February or March,” and he said, “That’s okay, within the first quarter.” Because I had seen him maybe two or three years prior and he asked about my children, I said they were done [school], and I’m actually thinking about maybe to come to Nigeria more often, even find something doing in Nigeria. He said, “Oh, well, I don’t know.” He didn’t say any more than that. He said, “Come and see me in Nigeria, and I might have an opportunity for you.” I said, “Okay.” So, I went. He actually paid for the ticket. He said I should come. He sent me the ticket. He was now the managing director of a bank, not the one that he took over some years back. That bank was also in the process of acquiring another bank, and he said, “Would you like to come and sit on the board?” I said, “Yeah, sure, you know I’d love that.” So, in April 2011, I was elected to the board of that bank, and that bank is the fourth largest bank in Nigeria.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What is the name of it?

**Kemi:**



It's called Access. Access Bank.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Congratulations.

**Kemi:**

Yes. So he is now the chief executive. I didn't realize how much travelling I had to do. He explained that they had board meetings once a quarter, and he said, "We have board meetings and we have board committees. There are four committees, you have to be on three. That's what the Central Bank requires. So, when you come for the quarter, you'll attend four board meetings," he said, "four times a year. You may have to come a fifth time." I said, "Okay." And then I realized there is a lot of travelling and I couldn't service my clients if I was going to travel so much. That's what informed the decision to close down the practice. But I didn't want to give up my licence, you know, I still wanted to be a lawyer in Canada. So, I'm keeping my licence and I'm still practising by doing the duty counsel.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Right.

**Kemi:**

Which is easy, because I only do—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You schedule that as one day.

**Kemi:**

Yeah. For this month, I have only one duty counsel. Next month, I think I have about two, because I'm going to travel back to Nigeria for some urgent meetings and stuff, and there's a training class, for just a week. Then, the next quarter starts in January. So, I'll tell the supervisor I'm not available in January, but, come February [I will be], so it works out. Because when I'm here, I'm not just sitting around doing nothing.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

It sounds very good.

**Kemi:**

So, I do that, and then it's very interesting because I have to turn my brain around from the [laughs] the financial stuff, and then come back and deal with the—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Do they help each other in any way?

**Kemi:**

No.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No, just, two different worlds.

**Kemi:**

Two different worlds.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You mentioned Singapore, I think, when I was speaking with you?

**Kemi:**

Well, we went for bank training in Singapore. Because of what had happened with the banks in America, and in the world, the banks had failed, banks are more regulated now. The Nigerian central bank regulates the banks very severely, and all over the world now, the decision is that it's the board of directors—they need to be more involved and understand what's going on. The directors didn't know—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Governance.

**Kemi:**

Governance. The directors didn't know proper governance. So, we have to be highly educated. So this course is for five days, and is to teach us about managing risk, and what is risk. We have to drive the policies and we have to oversee what the executive [does], so when they bring something to us and say, "We're doing this, we're doing that," we can say, "Um, no, this is too risky," or, "This is the level." And when they give

us a report on the state of the loans that they have, they've got all these loans are not being paid, "You know, you've given this amount of money. This is what you have on deposit." Your deposit levels are going low." So we've been taught, at what point is the deposit level too low? At what point do they have too many bad loans? So that we can, at that point, talk, speak out, or even call in the central bank and say, "There's a problem here."

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You're learning again.

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, yes, and you're seeing Nigeria in a different way again, I guess.

**Kemi:**

Hmm, hmm.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Picking up from decades ago the same field but it would be very different now.

**Kemi:**

Oh, yes, the first time I saw the loans—when I was there, they were giving out loans in millions of the currency. Now, they give it out in billions. So, the first time I saw the zeros, I said, “How many zeros?” [laughs]. I said, “Somebody’s borrowing 20 billion of the local currency?” I think 168 billion [naira] would be a billion dollars or something like that.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Fascinating.

**Kemi:**

Yeah.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, if you look ahead in 10 years, what do you see for yourself?

**Kemi:**

I will be retired.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

From both?

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And, where will you be?

**Kemi:**

Maybe I'll be in Florida playing golf [both laugh], because don't forget, do you know my age?

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

1951.

**Kemi:**

Yes. I'm 61. So, in 10 years I'll be 71. So, I definitely I won't do this duty counsel when I'm 65.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You've just made a decision on that?

**Kemi:**

Yes. I wouldn't do it past 65. The bank thing, there is also a term limit.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

All right.

**Kemi:**

So that, I think, it's limited to about 12 years, you can do a maximum of 12 years. But I don't know when I will give that one up but I know that the duty counsel work, I will give it up at 65.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And your children, do you anticipate, even though you've given them a world class education by coming here, do you think they will stay in Canada?

**Kemi:**

My eldest child definitely will stay in Canada.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And what does she do?

**Kemi:**

She works in daycare, child care. She loves children, and I don't see her (unless she gets married to someone and they decide to move out of Canada), I don't see her leaving. My middle daughter, the lawyer, she's more adventurous, and she would go anywhere where there's work that interests her. So I wouldn't be surprised if she

decided to go anywhere. But, right now, she doesn't plan to move. She plans to be here.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

And your son?

**Kemi:**

Mmm [laugh]. The Canadian. My son, at the moment, he is doing an MBA at McMaster School of Business, and I would like him to come and work in Nigeria. The reason being, that, because of the economic situation here, I fear that when he is done, he may not find work, and, he has already spent two years after graduating.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What an irony that would be.

**Kemi:**

Yes. So, he spent two years not working when he graduated. He had a degree and he was working at the mall selling cell phones. That's what he has done in the last two years. But that's because he took a year off after the degree, to *find yourself* [laughs].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

That sounds like one of those kinds of things that maybe you would have a harder time with.



**Kemi:**

No, I would have a harder time if you wanted to find yourself in the middle of your degree, the joke, the standing joke [Allison laughs] was that, if you got into university you had to finish.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Right.

**Kemi:**

You can't leave yourself halfway and say you want to go and find yourself.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

So, the agreement I had with my children, is that, after the first degree, you can take a year off to find yourself, and Bola did that, when she got her first degree in journalism, she took a year off, and, she basically travelled and did a little bit of work, so she could find herself. Then she did her LSAT exams, in readiness, and then she went to law school after that. So, I said to my son, "One year to find yourself." But when he did decide he wanted to do finance, he started this certified financial analyst degree. Of course he did the first part, part one. Part two, he struggled with that. So his sister said, "Why don't you go and do an MBA, because the content will help you to do the exams in

the future.” But things are so bad, right now, all over the world, that my fear that is that if he finishes, that he won’t find work. I’m trying to encourage him to come to Nigeria, because, I think, not that I think, I *know* that he will find [work].

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

It would be a great adventure for him.

**Kemi:**

Yes. So, you know, I’m not pushing it, I’m just putting the ideas out there. I don’t know, he may find work here. If he does, that’s fine. But, if he doesn’t, then he knows that at least he has a choice, that he can come. And I’ll be there often, so I would, kind of help him reintegrate. I’m not saying he should stay there forever, you know. He’s got that choice.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

So you’ve had, really, quite a few careers in the law, haven’t you?

**Kemi:**

Yeah, yeah. I’ve enjoyed it, so I’ve done criminal law, commercial law, and banking, family law, immigration.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Amazing.

**Kemi:**

Yes.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

My last question, tell me about your two ceremonies, about being called to the bar, first of all in Nigeria, and then, here, in Ontario.

**Kemi:**

Well, they were very similar. They were very similar. The robes are the same. I actually used the robes that I was called in [in Nigeria], I actually used that robe here. But in Nigeria, we also have a wig. The ceremony in Nigeria is that we went into the hall where we were going to be called. We also have benchers, so we had the benchers up on stage. Then, we had what we call the secretary to the Nigerian law school—here they have the treasurer.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Yes.

**Kemi:**

So, the secretary was the person who did the calling out and they had different members of the body of benchers, giving you your certificates. So you come up, they call you, the different members of the body of benchers would come up, they would congratulate you, give you your certificate. At that point you could then put on your wig. So, you actually went into the hall with the robes and everything but you had your wig in

hand, and you couldn't wear the wig until you went up on stage and you were formally called to the bar, so you got the BL.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Do you remember that moment?

**Kemi:**

Yes. I do, because my sister was there, and so was my brother and they had robed. I think one of the benchers recognized my name, and he had practised law under my dad. And it was actually nice when I started practising and was doing the criminal stuff and I would go to the court and announce my name, and a few of them would recognize the name because of my dad. So that was the way the ceremony was.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

And a lovely continuity. Now, what about at this end?

**Kemi:**

[Pause] Yes, it was good. It was very similar except that you were already robed and you just signed the roll, you took a photograph there, I think it was with a court of appeal judge. But it wasn't maybe as exciting because it was the second time. At the same time too, I felt very proud that I was able to do that. I felt that more for my children, you know, you can do whatever you put your mind to. And I think that was a lesson that I wanted to get across to them and I think the pride was more for them, because they weren't born, they weren't around when I was called the first time.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

No.

**Kemi:**

But this second time, they were there, and I think the pride was more on their side, so it was lovely.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

*This* has been lovely. Thank you very much for sharing with the “Diversifying the Bar: Lawyers make History” project.

**Kemi:**

Okay.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

Is there anything else you’d like to add? I should say that. Something I should have asked you and I forgot?

**Kemi:**

No. I just want to say that I’m impressed with the fact that the public is well protected in this country, and that the legal profession is self-regulating. That’s what I take from the Law Society, the protection of the public. I’m glad that we have the CBA and the OBA to

help us fight for our rights. That's what I really take from the practice of law here. Oh yes, another thing, if you are a foreign trained lawyer, and you can show that you've practised and you weren't disciplined, you didn't have to do articles. So I didn't have to article. But I said I wanted to go into a law office and see what is done, and they said, "Okay, you can article for three months." So, I did, I just worked in a law firm in Toronto, a Nigerian lawyer, just to see what he was doing. But, you don't have to article, once you can show that. So, this, this young man that I mentored here, he didn't have to do articles. Once he passed the bar exams he was called to the bar.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

And that was it.

**Kemi:**

Yes. I appreciate the fact that we didn't have to article, because it's difficult to find articles—

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

It's a barrier for almost everybody now.

**Kemi:**

But it would be nice, actually, it would be better. I think maybe they shouldn't make that exemption, because you do need the articling. Maybe they could just make it a shorter period? You could go maybe before being called to the bar, make it maybe three months. It would be easier for them to find somebody to article.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery**

So did you benefit from that experience then?

**Kemi:**

Not much, because he only did immigration. And his office wasn't that well organized, so I didn't really benefit. I learned more when I stayed in the office with Rose Adams.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Yes. She was your mentor, really, was she?

**Kemi:**

Yes. She, she mentored me but as soon as I got into the system, I had all the family law practitioners who mentored me. I loved that, I could just call on any one of them and say, "Look, I have a problem in this file," and they would just advise me. So, Rose did family law and real estate. But, as soon as I got into the system, I had other people who helped me.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

So, a good feeling in the bar here, a welcoming bar as well as—

**Kemi:**

Oh, yeah. They were wonderful. Last year when I celebrated my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, I had a choice. Usually, Nigerians, we all come to Toronto to celebrate our birthdays and things.

From all over the province, everybody comes to Toronto, because that's where the largest community is. But I decided to have my party in Barrie. It was my way of saying thank you to the people who had supported me. So, I had the lawyers, mostly the family law lawyers. I had the support workers from Ontario Works, then we had mediators. So I invited them, and I wanted them to see how Nigerians celebrate. One of the things we do when we have a party, everybody uses the same fabric.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Oh.

**Kemi:**

And so, I brought back fabric from Nigeria and I gave it to all the ladies, and I told them to make a skirt out of it.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

What colour was it? What did it look like?

**Kemi:**

It was black and orange. So I had them wear that, and I told them about our tradition, so they enjoyed it [Allison laughs], and we had Nigerian music and Nigerian food and everything. They were so thrilled that I gave them the chance to see part of our culture.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Good for you.



**Kemi:**

So I deliberately didn't have the party in Toronto, I had it here. And it was my way of saying thank you to these people that have supported me, and have been so good to me. So, that's been my experience in Barrie. The people I've come across, they've been warm, they've been kind, they've been loving, I haven't been conscious of any kind of prejudice.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Do you think it would have been different had you chosen Toronto and stayed there?

**Kemi:**

Oh, first of all, my children wouldn't have turned out as well, I don't think.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

No?

**Kemi:**

No, the influences there are terrible.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

You've seen it with other families, you mean?

**Kemi:**

Yes, my son would have, you know, pierced his ears, got a tattoo, and worn his [Allison laughs] pants down here. I am so glad that I chose Barrie. You know, I wouldn't have got as much work. Because the people I know there [in Toronto] are struggling in order to make it work. So, I am glad I chose this place, and, as I said, they are wonderful, my landlord, here, the other side, he is a lawyer and his son his a lawyer.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

Is that Owen?

**Kemi:**

Owen, yeah, he's kind of semi-retired. His son practises family law, and they've been just wonderful to me. You know, I go there. Even there was a time that I didn't have an assistant, one of the lawyers said his assistant can come and work for me in the evenings. if I needed anything, they've just been—you know they've just been wonderful to me.

**Allison Kirk-Montgomery:**

That's great. Well, thank you very much.

**Kemi:**

You are welcome, my pleasure.

[110.30 minutes]

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